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**Staying in Step with the Times:  
Some Thoughts on the Future of U.S. Naval Power**

**A Speech Delivered by  
Rear Admiral Joseph C. Strasser, USN**

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This memorandum discusses six propositions concerning the future of U.S. naval power. These propositions include: navies will retain their comparative advantages; the utility of the U.S. Navy will probably increase; most naval forces will decrease in size; the U.S. will face a quantity gap between force structure and international commitments; unless commitments decrease, readiness will probably suffer; and all U.S. services will increase their capabilities to conduct joint operations.

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A speech delivered by  
Rear Admiral Joseph C. Strasser, United States Navy

I've had the good fortune of being a naval officer for over 30 years, and thus am unabashedly proud of the job which our sailors do day in and day out in good weather and bad — and it can be really bad — far from their families all over the globe. I'm particularly impressed that the Navy is still deployed so widely throughout the world, especially since the fleet has fallen below the 400 barrier. That is, as of mid-September we had only 399 ships, the smallest force level since the buildup which occurred in World War II, and we are programmed to have about 330 to 345 after the turn of the century. Recently we have been averaging about 50% of the ships underway on any given day. When you keep in mind that about 15% of our ships are usually in overhaul or undergoing extended repair and refurbishment, then to have 50% of the fleet underway is a very high operational tempo in "peacetime" — which, incidentally, is not always as peaceful as some of us in the military would like. That operational tempo is understandable, however, for as the fleet grows smaller, tempo must inevitably increase as long as there is no lessening in commitments — which has been the case since the end of the Cold War. In other words, contrary to the expectations of many, the remaining naval forces do not have less to do now that the Soviet threat has evaporated; each individual unit actually is doing more. We are just starting to appreciate the genius of Yogi Berra, who noted, "The future ain't what it used to be."

What do such trends mean for the future of the Navy and its ability to advance American interests?<sup>1</sup> That's what I want to talk to you about today, for as an American engineer with a flair for good writing, Charles Franklin Kettering, once advised, "We should all be concerned about the future because we will have to spend the rest of our lives there."<sup>2</sup>

Let me now briefly set out two caveats: What will happen to the Navy depends greatly upon future world and national environments, and trying to predict what either will be like inspires more humility than confidence. How many foretold only a decade ago that the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact, and the USSR would wither away, that the UN would experience something of a renaissance, that there may be indeed some peace in the Middle East between Israel and the Arabs, that defense budgets of most primary and secondary powers would be cut very significantly, or that the 600-ship navy decided upon in the early 1980s would never become reality? Now it is true that many naval platforms and weapons in service today, as well as those in

design or construction, will still be useful well into the next century, but, in the absence of war, hard-to-predict political more than technical reasons will determine how many will be operational in, say, 2005.

In addition, sorting out the details of what any military *should*, as opposed to will, look like in 2015, for instance, cannot, as one writer put it after attending a Naval War College symposium, be specified today "for one simple reason. No one knows what [those details] are. It is impossible to design this force now."<sup>3</sup> A major reason is that we may be on the verge of a military-technological revolution such as occurred with the introduction of guns and cannons or the mechanization of warfare through the incorporation of the internal combustion engine.<sup>4</sup> The technological bases for such a revolution reside in advances in computers and communication systems and networks.<sup>5</sup>

Those caveats aside, let me offer you my views — and I emphasize that these are my personal views — about the future of naval power and of our navy in particular. I will offer 6 propositions.

*The first is that all navies, and certainly the US's among them, will retain their comparative advantages.* There are relative advantages associated with each of a nation's military services, and those associated with navies will not change appreciably over the foreseeable future. The US Navy and Coast Guard will remain the principal forces of choice, as is occurring today in the Caribbean, to guard against encroachments in offshore coastal waters. With the development and shipborne emplacement of advanced radars, I can also foresee naval forces participating in defending land areas against ballistic missile attack, an option which is being seriously considered for our navy and gamed at the college. In addition, American submarines carrying nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles should remain the most invulnerable and best accepted means to deter a strategic nuclear attack. They've been doing that for nearly 35 years.

Navies offer additional advantages to nations that, like the United States, can afford ships capable of sustained surface operations beyond coastal waters. The US Navy demonstrates every day:

- (1) that ships possess a legally-guaranteed right to transit the oceans;
- (2) that ships can maintain – as we strive to do in the Mediterranean, the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean – a presence which evidences our nation's concern with what happens in those regions;
- (3) that ships can hover off the territorial sea of friendly states, as we do in the Persian Gulf region, to help reassure them while remaining sensitive to their concerns about having foreign forces on their soil;
- (4) that ships can symbolize our resolve and readiness to act as they hover off the territorial sea of an unfriendly or crisis-plagued state such as we have done or are doing off of Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, Liberia, Iraq, Iran, and Libya;
- (5) that ships embarking airplanes, cruise missiles, and Marines uniquely represent a spectrum of air and ground as well as naval traditional capabilities;
- (6) that ships can provide protection to vital merchant shipping as we did during the "Tanker War" in 1987-88 in the Persian Gulf;
- (7) that ships can often rely on afloat basing if necessary, thereby getting around the constraints often imposed by states where we keep forces ashore; and
- (8) that our ships can often provide a safer haven for US personnel than might be available on land. This was one of the advantages, for example, of the United States' keeping its quick-reaction force for Somalia on offshore ships after the loss of 18 Rangers ashore.

*My second proposition is that the relative utility of the US Navy will probably increase – for two reasons.* The first is the trend toward closing US bases abroad and bringing our military forces back to the US. As a result, mobile naval forces are providing a greater

proportion of the forward deployed and on-scene military forces and, as affirmed in Department of Defense studies, that trend will continue. In the Mid-East/Southwest Asia region in particular, the US presence is, as President Clinton recently put it, "centered on naval vessels in and near the Persian Gulf and prepositioned combat equipment."<sup>6</sup>

A second reason is that the oceans will become more important to the well-being of peoples and nations. With that increased importance will come a greater appreciation for the value of naval forces. The world's population exceeds five billion with a present net increase of 90 million a year. Pressures on food, energy, water and mineral resources will inexorably cause people to turn to their 200-mile exclusive economic zones and beyond for acquiring and transporting those resources. As we saw in the Cod War between Britain and Iceland in the early 1970s or as we see in the Spratly Islands today where China, Vietnam, and Taiwan are squabbling over possible offshore oil deposits, tensions will be a by-product of that trend. Somewhat ironically, one writer saw this as the better of two evils, so to speak:

If we are fortunate, [he said,] future conflicts will not grow from tensions among developed countries. There are more and more reasons to believe that they will be increasingly resource-based. In the maritime domain, there will be disputes over fishing rights, access to the sea, artificial borders, and access to sea lines of communications for oil and other commodities.<sup>7</sup>

*My third proposition is that, even in the face of the above, most naval fleets will generally decrease in size but because of increases in quality some, especially that of the US, will remain very potent.* The quantitative decreases among navies are quite evident today though there are exceptions, particularly in Asia. The greatest reductions are taking place in those countries which had sized their forces to contend with the possibility of a major NATO and Warsaw Pact conflict.

The reductions, however, are being driven by more than just a decreased threat perception. One reality is the severe pressure on national budgets to handle social needs coupled with the increased costs of military personnel, hardware, and operations. Another reality is the rising sophistication of weapons, platforms, and especially

of associated surveillance, target acquisition, command, control, communication, and other support systems which magnify the effectiveness of weapons and platforms. Better quality will help insure that, as navies reduce in number, some should remain no less powerful.

This is especially true for the United States. Our Navy came close to reaching the 600-ship goal in 1989-90, but, as I said earlier, it will have only about 330 to 345 vessels in 2001, but their quality and especially their technological sophistication is and will remain first-rate, exceeding that of other navies. No other nation has gone as far as we have to take advantage of advances in computers, surveillance, communications, and the like.

Now, I know some of you are probably asking, Do we really need all this sophistication? Isn't it all just so much gold-plating? My answer is that sophisticated equipment in the hands of well-trained personnel saves lives. It's an important reason why the war against Saddam Hussein was so swift and had so few casualties. Also, if we don't invest in maintaining a technological edge now, we'll pay in the future — not only in battles lost but also in battles fought. I can't prove it, but it seems logical to me that at least some potential adversaries will not want to fight us in the first place as long as we have the edge on them. Lose it and you invite the bully to challenge you.

*My fourth proposition is that the United States will increasingly face a quantity gap because of our country's global commitments.* The United States is recognized as the foremost political power in the world, a power with global responsibilities. People look to us to lead, and when they are in trouble, they look for us to act as well. No matter how sophisticated we make our ships, any one of them can only be at one place at one time. It is already the case today that the commitments exceed the forces available, and the situation will only get worse as the fleet continues to grow smaller. I have seen planners struggle with ship schedules trying to square the circle of competing commitments, and I can well recall how, as a battle group commander, I sometimes wished I could make my ships go just a bit faster as we moved from one tasking to another. We regularly speak today of how ships are kept on tethers where, while operating in one area, they remain within a specified transit time to another area where a crisis might occur.



*My fifth proposition is that, unless we lessen our commitments, the readiness of our units will inevitably drop.* My reasoning here is simple and based upon historical precedent. If you keep personnel or ships at sea too long, you will run both down so badly as to seriously hamper readiness. The previous low point in ship numbers for our Navy was in the late 1970s, when we dropped to 459 ships. There was no lessening of commitments then either, and indeed the Iranian hostage crisis caused a major buildup in the Indian Ocean and the drug war a smaller buildup in the Caribbean. That the USSR also invaded Afghanistan did not help since the Soviet Navy was still our major maritime challenge. The end result was that operational tempos got to be very high with deployments of nine months not being unusual. As the Chief of Naval Operations at the time put it, "deployment lengths have increased and turnaround times have decreased . . . causing an adverse impact on both personnel morale and basic readiness."<sup>8</sup> Trained and experienced personnel voted with their feet by leaving the service, and equipment broke down from overuse and the deferment of planned overhauls. As the fleet increased in size again and as commitments levelled off, the problem righted itself, but we are on the verge of it re-appearing again.

It's not my place to tell you what commitments we should drop to correspond to the reductions in our force structure, but I predict that unless commitments are reduced or force structure increased, we may well see a repeat of the problems which arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I hope not.

*My sixth proposition is that all our services, including the Navy, will enhance their capabilities for joint and combined operations as one very important way of increasing efficiency in an era of decreasing resources.* Joint operations occur when one service in our military works with another to achieve a common goal. Combined operations occur when the military of two countries work together. The US Navy is vigorously pursuing both routes in its search for greater efficiencies, and I'm proud to say that the War College is playing an important part in both regards. Only slightly more than 50% of our students are in the US Navy. The remainder are from other services, civilian agencies, and the navies of other nations. Our course of study for the US officers is now centered on what is called "Joint Professional Military Education." In addition, our research and gaming faculties are extensively involved in working with all services and with foreign countries. Indeed, we even conducted a game in

May involving Navy and Marine officers from the US working with those from Russia and the United Kingdom. Who would have predicted that ten years ago?

The War College is not only involved in thinking about what will happen next to the Navy, but also what will happen beyond that as well. Following his attendance at a Summer Study Program at the Naval War College sponsored by the Director of Net Assessment in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Paul Bracken, a professor from Yale University, wrote an interesting article in *The Washington Quarterly* entitled "The Military After Next."<sup>9</sup> The impact of the article has been widespread, even prompting the Secretary of the Navy to publish an article entitled, "The Navy After Next." The crux of Bracken's article is that someone needs to be looking far enough into the future to study the problems associated with the rise of a powerful, new competitor to American interests.

Bracken suggests that the best institutions for developing and testing new concepts are "war colleges, operational testing centers, laboratories, and new distributed simulation and gaming networks."<sup>10</sup> He further states that "these centers need support and protection from immediate pressures." This may all sound a little self-serving; but I don't want you leaving today thinking you simply received a paid advertisement from someone whose job depends on spreading the party line or is protecting his own rice bowl. I am first and foremost a citizen of this great land and my primary goal as a taxpayer is to do what's best to secure the future for America.

Bracken didn't describe what "the military after next" should look like because, as I noted earlier, "it is impossible to design this force now."<sup>11</sup> The Secretary of the Navy found he confronted the same dilemma and was unable to detail what the Navy after next will look like. At the Naval War College we are involved in studying and gaming what it should look like.

Everyone recognizes that we are in a "once in a lifetime" interregnum with no serious military competitor to U.S. interests looming on the horizon. This pleasant state of affairs presents a real conundrum, for as Bracken notes, "Nothing lasts forever. This is as true of U.S. military superiority as anything else."<sup>12</sup> At the Naval War College, we are in the unique position of not only being able to research and game new and innovative concepts, we are in the business of molding

leaders. Our senior College of Naval Warfare is educating the officers which will inherit the "next military" and help plan the military after that. The junior College of Naval Command and Staff is training the officers who will refine "the military after next" and pass it on to an even younger generation which we will see at the Naval War College in the next five to ten years.

We are keenly aware of the responsibility this places on our shoulders. We welcome the challenge and seek not to indoctrinate students but to equip them with tools which will allow them to make their own reasoned judgments. Trying to stress "school solutions" for tomorrow's challenges would not only be inappropriate but would risk providing answers to the wrong questions. At all levels of the Department of Defense, the message has come out loud and clear — the most important assets in America's military are its personnel. The attitude at the Naval War College is that our job is to polish a national treasure — the men and women of the armed forces.

We are proud of our role in helping shape and secure America's future. I take great pride, for example, in noting that Admiral Mike Boorda, the Chief of Naval Operations, General Carl Mundy, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General John Shalikashvili, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Admiral Robert Kramek, the Commandant of the Coast Guard, are all graduates of the Naval War College. The generation of officers we are now training is no less talented.

Finally, let me end by noting a statement made by Prime Minister William Gladstone in 1866. During the Great Reform debate of the time, he argued that, "You cannot fight the future." The US Navy is not fighting the future. It is, as Gladstone recommended, attempting to accommodate itself to it, but it is also attempting to do so in such a way as to help insure that the US always has the requisite maritime capabilities to help shape its future in a way that benefits our children and their children, our heirs to the future.

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#### Notes

1. Many of the concepts contained in this paper were drawn from Donald Daniel, *The Evolution of Naval Power to the Year 2010*, Research Report 6-94 (Newport: Strategic Research Department, 1994).

2. In his *Seed for Thought* (1949).

3. Paul Bracken, "The Military After Next," *The Washington Quarterly*, 16 (Autumn 1993), p. 170.

4. See Dan Goure, "Is There a Military-Technical Revolution in America's Future?" *The Washington Quarterly*, 16 (Autumn 1993), p. 177.

5. Bracken, *op. cit.* at note 1, p. 162.

6. Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington, DC: The White House, July 1994), p. 25.

7. Derek Boothby, "Sailing Under New Colors," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, 118 (July 1992), p. 48.

8. Statement of Admiral Thomas B. Hayward, US Navy, Chief of Naval Operations, Concerning the Fiscal Year 1980 Military Posture and the Fiscal Year 1980 Budget of the U.S Navy," p. 38.

9. Bracken, *op. cit.* at note 1.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 165.